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Inside Information

USDA OUTLOOK CONFERENCE DATES SET

"Outlook '82" is the theme for the 58th annual agricultural outlook conference to be held Nov. 2-5.

The annual outlook conference is sponsored by USDA and will again be held in Washington, D.C.

Several USDA agency information staff members are called to serve on the information committee which helps media coverage of the conference.

Alice Skelsey, science and education staff information officer, will chair this year's information support committee.

Sally Michael, information specialist with USDA's World Agricultural Outlook Board, is in charge of the planning and operations for the conference.

Those who need more detailed information should contact Michael in Room 3510-S, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250, or call her at (202) 447-5447.

NAGC ANNUAL CONFERENCE SCHEDULED

The National Association of Government Communicators will hold its annual conference and workshops in Washington, D.C., Oct. 29-30.

The conference and several workshops will be designed to help government communicators meet the many challenges which lie ahead in the 1980s.

Evolving technology which is changing ways in which information officers and others communicate with each other will be a major topic.

Another will be the increasing visibility for and scrutiny of government programs.

Changing perception of communicators as professionals will be discussed.

A fourth emphasis will be the increasing pace of daily life which affects quality and quantity of communications.

The conference will be held in the Dupont Plaza Hotel. For further information, call NAGC at (703) 768-4546.

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INFORMATION STUDY GIVEN TO CONGRESS

USDA recently submitted its study of agency regional and field information activities to the Congress, as requested last year by the U.S. Senate.

The study was completed by the Office of Governmental & Public Affairs, with help from the Office of Inspector General and all USDA program agencies.

The report says that five USDA agencies administer field information organizations through about 185 regional and field offices in 155 different cities.

Most often these information offices are independent of each other and have very little direction from the Office of Governmental & Public Affairs--USDA's central information staff agency.

Fiscal year 1981 budget plans called for about 550 permanent full time and 140 part time personnel to be assigned to USDA public information and involvement activities in the field, at an estimated cost of nearly \$20 million.

About two-thirds of the total information budget, employees and offices are administered by USDA's Forest Service.

The report summarizes several previous studies and plans for establishing USDA-wide regional information offices.

A 1972 information advisory group recommended that USDA set up regional information offices to coordinate all field information activity.

That group included national presidents of organizations representing farm magazine editors, daily newspaper farm editors and radio-TV farm broadcasters, and representatives from land grant universities, USDA agencies and other interested organizations.

The latest study says the most appropriate option appears to be one recommended by a 1979 interagency task force.

Its recommendation called for a transfer of the multi-agency regional information operations currently administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service to department wide administration.

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These five USDA regional information offices then would serve as a base for a systematic phasing-in of other agencies' field information operations over a specified period of time, according to the 1979 recommendation.

The latest report says immediate consolidation of all USDA agency field information operations would be costly, as well as disruptive.

It even suggests that it would not necessarily be cost-effective, at least initially.

The report says a phased in approach would allow those agencies which currently do not have any kind of field information structure, or those which are planning a new system, to be able to buy in to the already established department wide operation.

The report points out that activities of current agency field information offices vary, sometimes considerably.

News release preparation and distribution, and associated news media liaison work, is major activity of three agency field information operations.

On the other hand, public participation or involvement work is the major effort of another agency's regional and field information staff.

The report carries several tables which give detailed numbers of personnel assigned to the regional and field information offices, office locations, cost of field office operations, occupational titles of personnel and kinds of activities of regional and field information offices.

The report concludes with the following statement:

"Any further delays in implementing a department-wide field information system will most likely result in continued criticism from news media, public organizations, state agencies and others seeking information from USDA because the department does not have a 'one-step' information service in the field."

Copies of the report were given to USDA agency information directors and regional information officers.

Anyone else wanting to see a copy may contact Stan W. Prochaska, Assistant Public Affairs Director, Office of Governmental & Public Affairs, Room 407-A, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250.

ARTICLE SAYS TO "MEASURE YOUR "FOG INDEX""

A recent article in Business Week magazine strongly recommends using the "fog index" and Rudolph Flesch's formula for improving one's writing.

It says one of the simplest and most consistent tests is the fog index developed by the late Robert Gunning.

It gives simple, but complete, instructions on figuring the level of understanding of any article, news release or other written communication.

The article suggests that if a writer wants to know whether the prose is interesting to read, use Flesch's human-interest score.

Again, detailed instructions are provided to help the writer discover the score.

The recommendations and instructions are part of a larger article in the July 6 issue of the magazine which is offered as an executive guide to polishing up one's writing.

Three keys to improved writing, it says, are: Learn the basics of writing clear, serviceable and unadorned prose; organize the prose in a rational order; and be precise and lively.

On the latter point, the article lists certain principles: Use the active voice, don't nominalize, don't dangle, avoid weak language, use active verbs and write tightly.

The author offers some examples of "bafflegab" which was translated into simple, easily understood English.

Although written for an audience of people who normally are not considered professional communicators, the article serves as a reminder to those writers who, in the rush of their daily chores, may forget the basics of good writing.

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